

# Needham Town Meeting Study Committee

Meeting Notes: Thursday, September 27, 2007

Location: Trustees Conference Room, Needham Public Library

Time: Posted: 7:30 pm Actual: 7:40 pm

Attending: Paul Denver, Elizabeth Handler, Maureen McCaffrey, James Hugh Powers, Greg Shesko

Absent: Susan Abbott, Mark Gluesing, Barbara Popper, Sally Toran

1. Paul Denver informed the committee that the following Town officials have been invited and encouraged to attend the October or the November committee meeting: Moderator Michael Fee; Town Clerk, Tedi Eaton; and a member of the Board of Selectmen.
  - One item to discuss with the Moderator is the issue regarding Town committee and board appointments, especially the Finance Committee. Can appointments be made in a more timely fashion? How can assistance be provided to the Moderator to help make these appointments?
  - A committee goal is that we would like to meet with these Town officials before the end of 2007.
2. Regarding the insertion of a Warrant Article to increase the number of members of the committee from 7 to 9, the Warrant for the November Special Town Meeting is closed. Therefore, it will be placed on the Warrant for the Annual Town Meeting 2008.
3. Paul Denver will speak with Town Finance Director, Dave Davison, about a page on the new town website devoted to the Town Meeting Study Committee.
  - The committee's meeting minutes can be posted here.
  - The committee would like to be able to receive feedback from Town Meeting Members (hereafter noted as TMMs) and non-TMMs by email.
  - One or two of the committee members will learn how to manage and take responsibility of the committee's page on the town website.
  - The committee needs to think about how TMMs can use this site.
  - A long-term goal might be to have a TMMs' page on the town's website possibly overseen by a "Rules Committee."
4. A motion to accept the minutes of the June 14, 2007, meeting was made and seconded. It was approved unanimously (5-0). Minutes of the July 26, 2007, meeting will be approved at the next committee meeting.
5. A motion to approve \$229.17 in copying and postage expenses submitted for reimbursement by James H. Powers was made and seconded. It was approved unanimously (5-0). Paul Denver will sign and mail to the Town Treasurer for reimbursement.

6. Minutes (accepted and pending) will be sent to the Moderator, the Town Clerk, and the Board of Selectmen to let them know what the committee has already discussed. At the next meetings, the committee will ask what their concerns are regarding Town Meeting.
7. The suggestion was made that our committee meet with a representative from the Finance Committee to hear how the Finance Committee sees its job with regards to Town Meeting and reporting to Town Meeting. The question was raised: are there other Town committees that our committee should hear from? No other committees immediately came to mind.
8. The issue of absenteeism: is there a problem? If so, how best to combat it? The committee agreed that absenteeism is not a serious chronic overall problem. The level of absenteeism is about the same as most RTM towns we have researched. However, there is concern about substantial absenteeism among a small group of TMMs. There is also concern about many members leaving at the break, although this is not currently quantifiable. The lower attendance rate after the break reduces the ability of Town Meeting to fairly do its business and represent its constituents. Suggestions to consider are as follows:
  - Don't start new item / issue after 10:00 p.m. (or 10:30 p.m.)
  - Don't have a break.
  - Call the meeting for 7:00 p.m. (if ending at 10:00 p.m.) or for 7:30 p.m. (if ending at 10:30 p.m.)
  - Make TMMs understand that they are responsible to those town residents whom they represent, possibly by adding a code of conduct to the Town By-Law; providing TMMs with an articulation of their duties and responsibilities.
  - Provide support services (e.g. babysitting).
  - Improve communication about upcoming Town Meetings, especially Special Town Meetings. The question was raised: Are Special Town Meetings, especially in February or March, needed?
  - Scheduling of Town Meeting: Are consecutive Mondays and Wednesdays the best days to meet?
  - We decided against discussing May versus April, as a recent proposal to change Town Meeting to April was defeated. We also decided against discussing holding town elections after Annual Town Meeting.
  - Publish attendance: Within two days (i.e. on Wednesday after the first day of Town Meeting on Monday, and every meeting night following), could the Town Clerk provide a list of TMMs absent from the previous meeting(s)? Discussion included whether or not a TMM could call the Town Clerk's office with a reason for the "excused" absence and then his/her name would not be published as absent. However, if that TMM was not in attendance, language would have to be clear explaining what the list of "absentee TMMs" represented. Other towns publish attendance within 7 days in (1) the local newspaper, (2) the town's website, or (3) in following year's Annual Town Report. Alternatively, only those names of those who missed 50% or more of Town Meetings (Annual and Special) in the previous 12 months would be published. Here in Needham, we could ask the League of Women Voters to include

attendance information in its local Voters' Guide, published by the Needham Times in the week before the local April election.

9. Other issues discussed included education of TMMs. What can be done to encourage them to come to Town Meeting having read and studied the Warrant? Could the minutes of the Annual Town Meeting be put on the website? How can we help publicize the League of Women Voters Warrant Meetings (held the week before Town Meeting begins) and encourage attendance? Can informational handouts be mailed to TMMs before Town Meeting begins, rather than being provided on the tables on the first night of Town Meeting? Can the Annual Town Report be published earlier than it currently is? How can the town's new website be put to best use to assist in educating and communicating with TMMs?
10. The committee is asked to think about a legislative response to these issues. Possibly a "Rules Committee" made up of TMMs could include in its responsibilities the need to make contact with an absent member to find out about his/her absence. If not a "Rules Committee," possibly a group of Precinct Chairs (one from each precinct).
11. The committee thanked Mr. James Hugh Powers for all his hard work in contacting many other Representative Town Meeting town clerks and collecting information about their Town Meeting policies and procedures.
12. The meeting was adjourned at 8:56 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
Elizabeth Handler